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ABSTRACT

In the past decade there has been an increasing interest in using alternative forms of representation in qualitative research. Many believe that the use of different forms can enhance the evocative potential of research findings, expand and include more voices in the research, and challenge some long-term notions of what constitutes research and why. The experiences of a graduate student, a teacher in a master's program who was beginning a change of teaching assignment, illustrate an alternative of expression of qualitative research results. The student came to the attention of the instructor because of his own facility on using alternative forms of expression in class assignments. It was thought that understanding this student's experience would help the instructor help other students build on their own representational strengths and add to the general discussion about alternative representation in qualitative research. The process by which the student arrived at a collage of artifacts to represent his student experience is described. The finished collage is both a self-study and a vehicle for thinking about ways of fostering alternative representations of experience. (Contains 20 references.) (SLD)

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Alternative Representation in qualitative Inquiry: A Student/instructor Retrospective

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Alternative representation in qualitative inquiry: A student/instructor retrospective

In the last decade there has been an increasing interest in using alternative forms of representation in qualitative research. Many believe the use of different forms can enhance the evocative potential of research findings, expand and include more voices in research and challenge some of the longstanding, mainstream notions of what counts for research and why. There is considerable agreement in educational arenas that the potential of human communication and understanding can be limited, both in the message it offers and the creative expressiveness it permits, if restricted to expository text alone. The study of narrative, student-centred inquiry, artistically-based qualitative research, multiple intelligences and genre theory attests to this (Bruner, 1988; Butler-Kisber, 1997; Eisner, 1991; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Gardner, 1983; Romano, 1995). However, in spite of recognition of the need to build on the varying strengths of learners by affording them different avenues of communication and of the possibilities alternative forms may engender, there is still resistance among academia that this should apply to graduate work and little to illustrate how it may be achieved in credible ways.

Background

In the fall of 1995, we found ourselves as participants (John as full-time graduate student, and I as instructor) in a 03-credit qualitative research methods course which involved 33 graduate students pursuing masters and doctoral degrees. The contact time was three hours per week in the evening to accommodate part-time students who constituted approximately 2/3 of the class. The course was implemented as a hands-on, introduction to qualitative methodology in which all completed an entry account, produced a mini-proposal and then collected, analyzed and presented data in project submissions.

John came to our program that same fall on leave from his grade two teaching post in western Canada. Through downsizing, he had been forced to move from the high school where he had been teaching English and music. I, on the other hand was conducting a version of the course for the fourth time. Influenced by my teaching experiences with both young children and adults as well as the theoretical work of Eisner (1979; 1991) and Gardner (1983), I was attempting to encourage the use of alternative representation among graduate students in their qualitative projects without compromising rigor. For example, there were assigned readings by Barone (1983), Donmoyer & Kos (1993) as well as Eisner (1991). A film of Gardner discussing his notions of multiple intelligences and implications for schools was presented and a doctoral candidate provided an example of the use of dramatic representation in his thesis to depict the selection of school administrators. As well I attempted to suggest possibilities for alternative

forms of representation using some of my own data and wove in the use of literature, poetry and narrative as in-class work.

As a result of what transpired in the class, a number of students explored some interesting avenues. One student submitted her mini-proposal in the form of a letter to a friend which she said enabled her to get her ideas "out" after exploring more traditional formats she found inhibiting. A group of three submitted the results of their study in the form of a fairytale so that it would be more accessible to their grade five students who were participants in their research. While the format was engaging, they were less able to demonstrate how their product was linked to their inquiry thus detracting from the overall persuasiveness of their piece (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The most consistent adherence to alternative forms of representation emerged in John's work. He had decided to observe the reading and writing in an elementary classroom. From the outset he began experimenting with integrating prose, poetry, art and music in varying formats of size and scope for his assignments. These revealed that he grasped the fundamental aspects of context, participant perspective, transparency, trustworthiness, ethics and issues of bias. His comments indicated he felt liberated when not restricted to a traditional format:

> " Sept. 6- I make a note"- 'Wow, do you mean I can do art as a basis of my work for this course?' (Chronological portrait, Feb. 02/97)

His work suggested to me the need to understand what it was about his personal experience in the course that made him opt to use different representational forms for the assignments. I felt a deeper understanding of his experience would assist me in being more effective with future students both in helping them to build on their representational strengths and guiding them in the process. As well, an explication of the "particular" could add to the general discussion about alternative representation in qualitative research (Donmoyer, 1990).

Methodology

Accordingly, I approached John after the course was over and we agreed to collaborate in a retrospective analysis of how he went about doing his assignments and what aspects of the course supported his endeavours. To do this we each collected and sorted our artifacts from the course. These included John's project work and personal logs and my course outline, class logs, syllabus, handouts and visual material. This exercise had two purposes, to re-visit the experience individually in anticipation of our retrospective interview (see below) and to pull together information that could serve as corroborating or disconfirming data at a later date (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). We intended from the beginning to analyze our data and describe the work in textual form and also to depict this journey visually for presentation and discussion purposes.

Our next step was to conduct an audiotaped intereview with each other over several hours. During this time we focused first and longest on John's description of how he got started,

the process he followed and the aspects of the course, and any others, that helped or not, the work he had done. Then we exchanged roles and I described what my plans had been for encouraging this kind of work, the constraints I experienced and why. We adhered to an open-ended interview format, allowing each of us, as interviewees, the maximum "air time" but exploring and asking for explanations as needed (Seidman, 1991).

The audiotapes were transcribed by an outsider who was instructed to capture the verbatim interaction and any paralinguistic features that would ultimately enhance our understanding. Since we were trying to get at "how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events" (Reissman, 1993, p.2), we opted to use an adapted version of Fischer & Wertz's approach to narrative analysis (1975, p. 144), that of familiarizing, demarcating, ordering and condensing, to stay as close as possible to the data and make the process transparent. In particular, we used this approach to make John's process explicit. We decided, unlike Fischer & Wertz, not to do a series of narrative synopses and a final, textual condensation but rather to move from temporally linked, thematically representative units that showed how John approached his work into a collage of artifacts to visually depict this process. We felt this "condensed illustration" could serve the purpose of the textual condensation. We did, however, construct individual case synopses from our interviews with each other to illustrate what we felt we brought to the setting. We chose to do this because this kind of information did not lend itself to a visual rendition.

John returned to the west coast after the summer and the distance between us mandated that we allocate duties. I took responsibility for the narrative analysis of our transcripts. We collaborated using our artifacts to get insights and check out ideas and interpretations. John wrote up results of the interviews he conducted with 3 student colleagues. In these he had explored reasons they had not opted to pursue alternative forms of representation. He also reviewed all of his course material and did a close reading of our interview transcripts and in order to write a" chronological portrait" of his process and experiences in the course. This work and our ongoing conversations contributed to my analyses and highlighted the need to look carefully at what was essential in John's experience coming into the course. Comments from his peers such as:

> "I feel best with a traditional approach because that is what I grew up with. Lynn did encourage more diverse stuff...I would like to have had more chance to discuss it in class, especially at the beginning of the course." (Pam)
>
> "It takes more energy to think of something creative. I am more secure using a conservative paper...marks cause one not to experiment. (Carol)
>
> " I'm not secure with how it will be accepted...I am a mathematician. There is only one way to do stuff to get the answer. Academics is linear and I separate artistic from scientific...It never occurred to me to integrate an artistic and a conventional approach...(Ron)

This information suggested the need to build from the transcripts, an individual case synopsis about John's experiences before McGill. The case synopsis provided a sense of his background and resonated with discussions we had and with our artifacts. It also foreshadowed some of the thematic elements which later emerged as important in his process. (Words in bold indicate verbatim text from the transcripts.):

> John had been in a **high school mode** and a **band director mode** for 23 years while he taught English and music **and his colour came from his travels.** When his job was cut as itinerant band director, he spent **all his time retraining to teach 7 year olds**. That became a **renaissance** for him, **the re-discovering of schooling and education**. He **discovered with the children the importance of journalling with drawing and writing, finding things they were doing fascinating** and doing them himself. He continued **orchestrating his class** not minding they were all **doing different things**. Not wanting to be **locked in one spot** he took his **grade 2 children out often into the larger community, broadening their horizons** but with **a purpose**. When his school principal indicated **sabbaticals** were **going to people who had to retrain**, he thought about it for a week or two, submitted a proposal and ended up for a year at McGill.

To elicit the elements of John's representational process required several close readings of the transcripts. I referred back to the tapes for clarity and nuances that were not possible to garner from the transcripts alone. I demarcated the text into units where "the criterion for a unit was that its phrases require each other to stand as a distinguishable moment in the overall experience" (Fischer & Wertz, 1975, p. 144). The numbered lines of the transcript allowed me to return easily to the context from which the phrases were taken and to tease out the temporal aspects of the experience represented in these units and to order them accordingly. There was a repetitiveness about certain units that suggested patterns across them. For example, the notion of invitation emerged and how invitations were a starting point for John in preparing his assignments. Further examination of the tapes and other materials revealed that John used invitations from many different contexts. Below are two examples of temporally ordered units that illustrate these invitations:

I.
33: You'd mentioned...creativity was a possibility
47: ...(you) would like this to be exciting and engaging
21: ...Eisner and...Gardner were mentioned if you were interested in creativity
22: ...in art and interested in that type of thing and my ears perked up
58: I'm going to see if she really means what she says.

II.

456: ...it could be anywhere that I am
455: It could be in a newspaper,
456: it could be a section of art,
457: a piece of artwork that I'll see will inspire me.
461: ...something that's important to me
458: ...so I will take note.

By comparing and contrasting similar units in the transcripts, the dimensions that were essential to a theme became apparent. A return to the transcripts enabled me to construct a series of representative units to encompass these dimensions . These units were then ordered in a way that most closely approximates the generalized process John followed as he prepared his assignments:

I. The invitation:

433:You need someone to kind of ask you, invite you, give a suggestion
450: something someone says or something I can see visually
438: ...I wouldn't have thought about
451: that may relate to me in some way
421: it needs a little spark you see
569: you feel it's important

II. The direction:

382: I have a score at the beginning
468: ...know what your goals are
485: it will...become more full or deep or layered
484: ...more efficient

III. The orchestration:

451: I'll write it down...hear it...record it somewhere
441: I may not respond to it right away but I will not
442: shut the door
462: then it will be processed...see if I want to follow up
591: and with the added thing of writing it down
582: there's collaboration
584: other people who listen to your ideas...give some other ideas
17: getting the data from as many sources as possible
476: I guess I'm exploring, where I'm going, where my thinking is

IV. The representation:

594: I enjoy revisiting...
509: ...to have a multiplicity of things to do
388: ...working on balance, tone, expression and content, staccatos and legatos
389: Merging them all towards this end

Naturally, it is simplistic to suggest what John does is really a linear process which unfolds through the 4 steps outlined above. However, when he retrospectively and unconsciously organized his experiences as he did in our interview, the data show this is how the process can be understood. The data suggest this process is not relegated to the production of his assignments for the course, but rather cuts across his other everyday experiences, for example, his travel and teaching. It appears John is very receptive to, and constantly receives, stimuli from around him that "invite" pursuit. He seems to be able to balance what might otherwise become frenetic activity by prioritizing and establishing goals and reminding himself of these to keep directed and efficient. This occurs once something has engaged his interest and perhaps helps him to remain open to suggestion. In the orchestration phase he enjoys engaging with "many voices," books, friends, media, his everyday environment. He keeps track of these in his journal and/or on readily accessible material such as placemats, coasters, newspapers, napkins, etcetera. When faced with the task of creating a representation, such as an assignment, he returns to all of this material and produces his message through a combination of expository and expressive means requiring him to attend to different levels and dimensions of what he wants to communicate.

The chronological portrait he developed independently supports this interpretation:

> Nov. 22: I receive notes on concept maps and on "pentimento." These become important in the form of my course work. I remember an "AHA" type feeling upon listening to Lynn describe "pentimento" and I could see how I could use it in my work, overlaying text on my artwork. The concept map idea simmered for awhile until the data analysis where I used it for a large art-piece component...
>
> (Chronological portrait, Feb.02/97)

However, the experience, creativity and maturity John brought to the course were far more important than anything I did. I only opened a gate. It should also be pointed out that my ultimate responsibility for the narrative analysis and our roles as student and instructor may have had an impact on the explication of this process (Reissman, 1993). Support for the explanation lies in the fact that the work is closely grounded in verbatim data and across instances. As well, my relative distance from John's experience may have helped me to see things that he might not have (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Naturally, the reverse could be true. Had we been able to work in close proximity, throughout the study, our interpretation might have been different but we would hope no more or less convincing.

An individualized case synopsis constructed from the unitized transcripts helps to capture what my orientation was towards alternative modes of representation. (The words in bold are verbatim extracts.):

> **I was very influenced by Howard Gardner's work** for it propelled me **back to my own teaching practice in an elementary classroom**. **One**

student who was having difficulty with literacy and numeracy was very talented in **art**. In a transportation project where the children constructed their findings instead of writing them **he really blossomed** by **building a Viking ship with three other children**. This talent generally went unnoticed in his schooling and **he ended up in special class**. Later **I used** and explained **this story in conjunction with Gardner's work** and encouraged different kinds of representation in teacher preparation courses. **When I got interested in actually teaching qualitative research, and saw Eisner's work, this started to make another connection for me**. I realized that for **graduate students, we were really talking about the same thing as** classroom **inquiry** and therefore, **there should be multiple forms of representation** in this area, too. **Eisner was the first step that I came across that was actually delving into that**. So I became **seriously interested in that a few years ago and have been pursuing that ever since. I think we penalize students at every level if they're not allowed to explore alternate forms**.

An approach that I used in the course which we are calling "fanning interest" illustrates the tension I felt between encouraging and not imposing alternative forms of representation. This is revealed in a unitized version of my words from the transcripts:

949: I've called it in my notes...fanning interest
945: you have to do something that comes from within
944: I think it has to be fun...you have to be engaged
953: ...my notion was not to preclude any possibilities
954: I didn't want them to think alternate was fancy
966: I want to make sure the class is aware
970: ...spark a few things.

While I was previously aware that I was reluctant about mandating certain kinds of products for democratic reasons as well as skill, it was only after the analyses of the transcripts that I realized just how tentative I was. This may be yet another reason why so few in the class attempted to use other representational forms. A unit from the transcripts where John suggests emphatically how to "get the message across" implies he perceived this tentativeness:

718: ...more time...talking about the creative part
721: Show some stuff that's creative
727: ...take class time to do that
752: You know, literature immersion, art immersion
724: ...value both the text and creative
761: ...show as much as you can

The were approximately 10 documented "moments" throughout the course where I tried to "spark a few things" through suggestions or illustrations. When these were juxtaposed with John's chronological portrait, the assignments he produced and the narrative analysis, it became apparent that 2 of these stood out as special "invitations" to John which he then pursued. The first occurred early in the course when I talked about Eisner's work, more specifically, his 6 features of qualitative research, and discussed the AERA arts-based institute I had attended the previous year. John's follow up included the reading of Cognition and Thinking (1979) which subsequently influenced his forms of representation in his assignments. The second was when I introduced the notion of "pentimento":

> Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When this happens, it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called **pentimento**... Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again.
>
> (Lillian Hellman, 1973 cited in Hubbard & Power, 1993, p. 65)

I presented this on an overhead late in the course when the students were getting ready to submit their projects. I suggested this concept could be used as a way to get at the essences of qualitative research and I read aloud one of my favourite children's books entitled Owl Moon by Jane Yolen (1987). I indicated why this book appealed to me so much (winter, closeness of the father and daughter, exploration and mystery, moon connection, female voice- Class notes, Nov.22/95). Then the class worked in small groups on an excercise where they applied the pentimento concept first to see how the Yolen book about a daughter going owling with her father could illustrate the essential elements of qualitative research. Then they critically examined a small study to see which of these elements were present or missing.

Ilustrated condensation

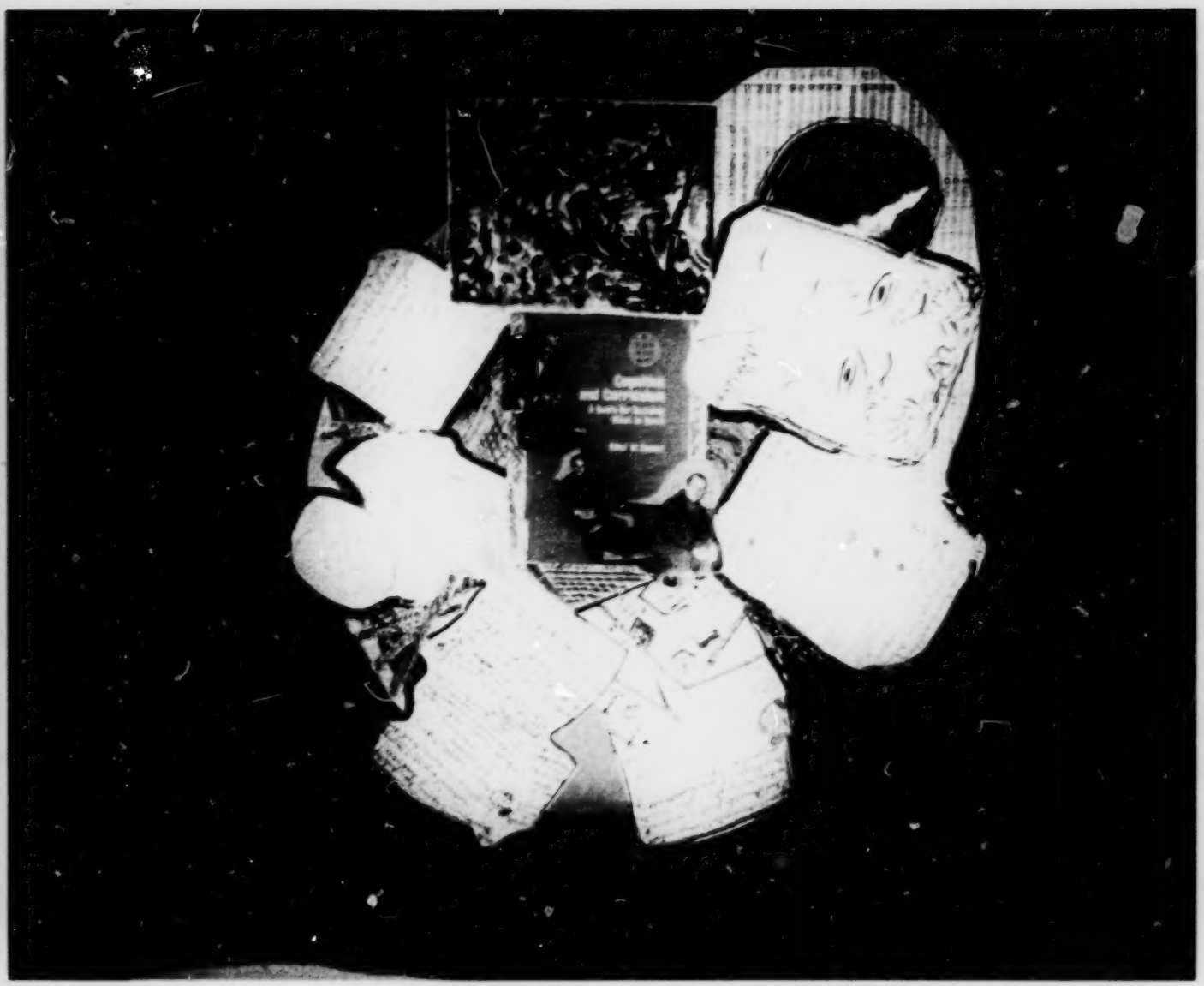
In Fischer & Wertz's work (1975, p.148), they follow illustrative narrative and individual case synopses with a general condensation, "the compact description of the characteristics common to the transcription...to express the bare essentials of the experience briefly and accurately, encompassing all individual cases." We used an adapted notion of this idea to look at the two intersecting moments described above that occurred when I was trying to "fan interest" and John "felt invited" to take up the invitation. Around these nexus points we have created a condensed visual illustration of what occurred.

To do this we collaborated by amassing our course artifacts and decided a collage seemed to offer the most appropriate form for this purpose. It would retain and juxtapose important, contextual features and at the same time express aspects of the process that would not be captured in a textual representation. John took responsibility for creating the collages. I observed

him during this 6-hour process as he worked at depicting the essences of these journeys (Fischer & Wertz, 1975, p. 150) and then we discussed what he had created.

John produced two circular collages of our artifacts from the course approximately 18 inches in diameter. These represented his processes emanating from my introduction of Eisner's work and the pentimento exercise described above. It was intended that the size of the collages would permit viewers to easily see and read the textual and non-textual details of the artifacts at the roundtable presentation for which this paper was prepared. The necessarily reduced copies of the collages reproduced below do not permit the same detailed viewing but at least give a sense of the process and the representational form. These illustrate how our reliance on textual forms limits alternative representational possibilities.

John explained (Discussion, April 1997) how he chose the book jackets of Eisner's Cognition and Curriculum (1979) and Yolen's Owl Moon (1987) as the focal points of each collage and placed them centrally to lead the viewer to "read outwardly." He hoped to engage the viewer visually, spatially and textually. He used overlays of photographs and a transparency to show the links and orchestration of his "dialogues" with the other sources and stimuli around him. He chose the yellow connecting colour to create a mood of joy and used other textured colours, created by superimposing lines on colour, to connect themes within the collages. He tried to retain sufficient content in the textual pages to enable them to be self-explanatory and stand alone. The spatial orientation of the artifacts, the overlaying of the shapes and the use of primary colours express the notion of triangulation in qualitative research integrated with the primacy of art. The fact that form is fluid and evolving but influenced by function is reflected in the irregular shapes of the individual pieces in the collages. Here John is suggesting "pushing the boundaries" of representational form by allowing pieces of the collage to extend beyond the circular format.



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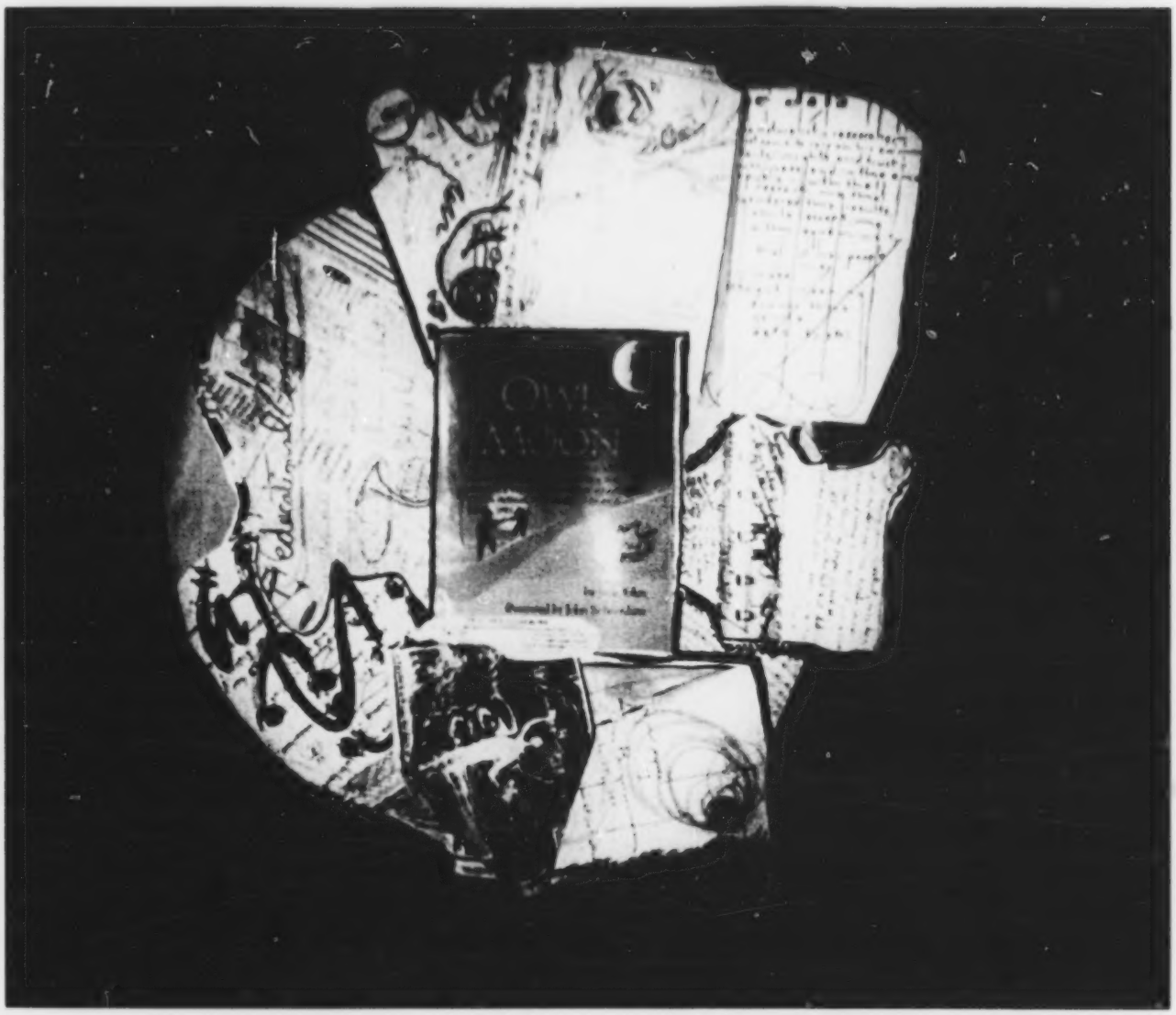

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Reflections

There is no question that this is an exploratory study. We have attempted to get at an individual process in a particular context. The retrospective nature of the work and the fact that it is a "self-study" have the advantages and disadvantages of both distance and proximity (Ely, 1991; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). However, we believe it provides a vehicle for thinking about and discussing ways of fostering experimentation with and use of alternative representational forms. It also suggests the need for further study of alternative representation at all levels of schooling and across disciplines, particularly if we accept the notions that representational symbols affect the way we perceive and understand things and the preferred modes of representation have perpetuated exclusion rather than inclusion (Eisner, 1997).

The most pragmatic use of the work (Riessman, 1993) will accrue to John and I. John believes it may facilitate the proposal stage in which he is currently engaged and the work that will ensue. He intends to push the boundaries of this work by studying the process of his journey through all his courses using a combination of representational means to communicate what he finds. His final monograph will be more carefully scrutinized on a public level and exposed to the inherent reservations some members of his audience may have about the appropriateness and rigorousness of such an endeavour. The increased transparency about what was previously a largely implicit process may be helpful, on the other hand, this added dimension of self-consciousness may serve at times to be an encumbrance, immobilizing him or stalling his activity (Cazden, 1988).

From my perspective this work will contribute significantly to my teaching of qualitative research methods. First, I am convinced there must be others who come to my classes with similar propensities and strengths for using different symbol systems for representing their thinking. For whatever reason, they have not had the necessary support and/or previous experiences to develop these abilities. These multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) have probably been stifled through lack of use. I need to know more about students' previous experiences. It will take much more than suggestion on my part to foster the necessary risk-taking required to experiment with possibilities and will require a certain context to encourage this kind of work. An invitation to explore alternative representation that is linked to a mark in an assignment or grade in a course can transmit a mixed message and inhibit the potential. I need to be less tentative and provide more and varied examples through my own, students' and others' work as well as opportunities that are not tied to formal evaluation. Equal value must be accorded more traditional products to avoid sensationalizing alternative forms at the expense of persuasiveness and to encourage matching form with purpose.

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